



TOUGH GUY Even with a broken leg, the ram scrambled for dozens of miles across the Bitterroot Range each year for several years. This photo came from video taken by a hunter who saw him several times in fall of 2022.

Godspeed, Little Ram By Rebecca Mowry

On March 9 of this year, I received a very unwelcome text message: One of my Painted Rocks bighorn sheep GPS collars had switched to “mortality” mode.

This wasn’t just any sheep: We’d caught him in February 2021 during a helicopter net-gunning operation, in which we netted, immobilized, then collared several bighorn rams and ewes to monitor their movements across the landscape and, when they eventually died, learn the cause. During the capture operation, we noticed that this ram had a badly broken rear leg. It wasn’t caused by the capture; his cracked tibia was scarred over and bulbous with the hoof bent backward and overgrown. He’d essentially been walking on his knuckle, for a year at least.

I remember the team debating whether we should euthanize him then and there. But since the injury was old, we decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, collar him, and hope for the best. He ended up being my most interesting sheep.

Probably due to the injury, the ram was small for his age, which we estimated from his horn rings was about four years at the time of capture. But even with a badly broken leg, he could sure cover ground. Each spring he traveled over 15 miles from Painted Rocks Reservoir northeast to Trapper Peak, the highest mountain in the Bitterroot Range (10,157 feet). We had no idea these sheep would

move that far, or go that high. He spent all summer up there, ranging across the high country toward (and sometimes across) the Idaho border and then back to Trapper. Then, like clockwork, he’d return to Painted Rocks for the rut. He made this journey several times before his untimely demise.

Immediately after I received the mortality alert—sent by the collar after the animal is immobile for four hours—my dog and I hiked up a steep hill north of the reservoir and there, at the base of the cliffs, was the ram. We’d followed mountain lion tracks in the snow to the kill site, and it appeared likely that the ram had been killed by a lion. Wound marks indicated the carnivore had held the ram’s face to suffocate him, and his fur had been plucked off, characteristic of a lion attack. Likely his broken leg made him easier prey, and it was surprising he lived as long as he did.

I like to think that wildlife appreciate the grandeur of their habitat as much as we do. Bighorn sheep country is truly glorious. After removing the sheep’s GPS collar and preparing for the return trek, I had to sit down in the snow and take a moment. As I looked out over the wild, rugged West Fork Bitterroot River valley from those lofty cliffs, I couldn’t help but admire Broken Leg Ram and all he had accomplished in his short life. He beat the odds (at least for a time). And his existence added greatly to our understanding of his herd while providing us a glimpse of the incredible tenacity of life in some of the West’s toughest terrain. 🐏

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